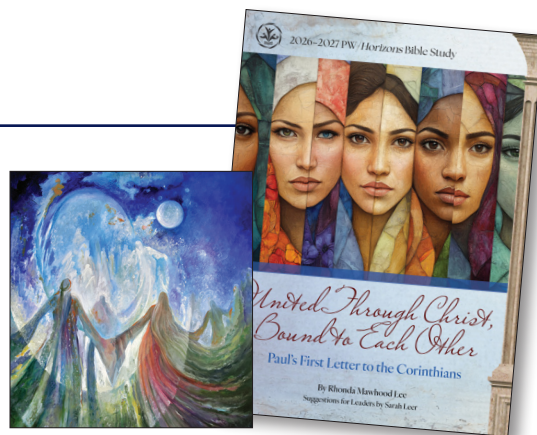


Walls, Centers and Freedoms

BY REV. JOANN HAEJONG LEE

For use with Lesson Three of the 2026–2027 PW/ Horizons Bible study, *United Through Christ, Bound to Each Other: Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, by Rhonda Mawhood Lee



Many of us who grew up in strict religious communities grew up with what I call a *boundaried faith*. This framework builds walls to divide acceptable behavior from unacceptable. Those who comply with the rules are “in” and those who do not are “out.” You either fall within the boundaries of the community, or you step out or are kicked out.

It feels safe and comfortable to be within the boundaries of this type of faith. You feel like you belong. But too often, those who make the boundaries are the ones who are already in power. Even faith communities can perpetuate patriarchy, homophobia and systems of oppression, instead of rooting them out. So if you cannot or do not fit in, you are ostracized and left out.

In contrast, a *centered faith* is one that holds to a small set of core values found in scripture. Rather than every rule determining whether you are in or out, the center functions as a shared focus that can be expressed in diverse ways.

Included within those core values are the ethic of love, the pursuit of justice and the liberation of the oppressed. What I consider central for me is rooted in Micah 6:8—to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with God.

If those walking with me on my faith journey hold similar centered values, then who they love, what their family looks like, or even who they bed are not an issue (assuming that *how* they bed is

consensual, loving and healthy). On the other hand, if those who profess to share our Christian faith and tout so-called “traditional family values,” are harming others, scapegoating the already vulnerable among us, and seemingly incapable of doing justice, loving kindness, or walking humbly, I have to question what kind of faith it is that they follow.

The freedom we find in Christ is not meant for us to use to shackle others, but to work for the liberation of *all* people. The Greek word often translated as salvation (σωτηρία/*sotiría*) does not simply refer to the saving of our souls for the afterlife. In fact, the verb form means to save, rescue, heal or make whole. It's the same word used when Jesus heals someone of a physical illness or rescues the disciples during a storm.

The English word “salve” comes from the same roots. The noun form of the word means savior but also deliverer and liberator. Salvation, then, is liberation for all people. Those who are saved are free from systems of power or dominance, and we are free to live in safety and peace. Or, as Jesus put it, we are free to live and to live abundantly (Jn 10:10).

Our freedom to live abundantly, however, should not impede upon the thriving or the well-being of others. As humans, we too often forget how we are all interconnected and how our actions affect others in our community.

To bring this close to home, I have three children. If all three are on the couch and one wants to stretch out, it would encroach on the space of their siblings. The stretch could be argued, “I can sit however I want! It’s a free country!” However, the two crammed together would feel less than free.

As Paul writes, “All things are permitted for me,’ but not all things are beneficial” (1 Cor. 6:12a). Rather than just doing whatever we want since we are free to do so, we must also weigh how it benefits us *and* those around us. Is anyone being harmed? Am I causing distress? Who is affected and how? If at the center of our faith, we believe that God calls us to love one another, then our freedoms should reflect that same kind of grace, generosity and care to others.

The same goes for how we treat our bodies, which we mostly believe to be a personal thing. In these two chapters from 1 Corinthians, we see that our bodies and what we do with them can affect the larger community, too. I believe the sexual immorality Paul names primarily addressed sexual exploitation and abuse. And with no uncertainty, I affirm that this harms the body of Christ.

I lament that these chapters have historically been used to marginalize and ostracize the LGBTQIA+ community rather than to hold accountable those who sexually abuse children, rape women, or use sex as a means of domination and control. This history of interpretation tells us more about our own prejudices than it does about God’s. And it is time we stop trying to police the sexual ethics of consenting adults. What if instead we focused on charging and prosecuting those who use sex and their bodies to harm the most vulnerable among us? For instance, rape should not be used as a weapon of war. Rape kits should not sit in hospitals waiting to be collected as evidence. Organizations should not cover up or protect abusers and allow them to continue

working in their fields. Our bodies can cause harm to others. But it should not be this way.

Paul asks, “Do you not know that your body is a temple?” (1 Cor. 6:19). Not only are we loved by God, we all bear the image of God within us. We are incarnational people. So let us treat ourselves and one another with the holy awe and love we would for God.

Questions for Reflection

1. Reflect on how religion and faith have been presented to you—a boundaried faith and/or a centered faith? Describe instances where you recognize the wall or the center in your life choices or path?
2. At what point do our freedoms encroach on the ability of others to be free?
3. How can we better love and honor our bodies so that we treat them as a temple?

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Unique Individuals, United in Faith

BY REV. JOANN HAEJONG LEE

For use with Lesson Four of the 2026–2027 PW/
*Horizons Bible study, United Through Christ, Bound
to Each Other: Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*,
by Rhonda Mawhood Lee



Someone once pointed out to me that Paul and Jesus were two very different people. Jesus was a humble carpenter's son living as a subject in Roman-occupied Palestine. He never fully belonged to any one group. He was Jewish, but many Jewish leaders of his day viewed his teachings as divergent from Jewish tradition. He lived in the space between being fully human and fully divine.

Paul, on the other hand, was a Roman citizen with the rights and privileges that came with that status. People in his sect of Judaism admired him for his leadership and zealotry. Paul belonged and thrived in the Roman Empire, enjoying benefits and power in ways that Jesus did not. It's possible—that because their statuses and vantage points of the world were so different—that their approach to faith might sometimes be different.

Reading the scripture passages for Lesson Four, I could not help but cringe at times. The cultural norms of Paul's day could explain away some of my discomfort. Paul's status and privilege coloring his understanding of faith could also explain away some of my discomfort. But, ultimately, Paul's words invite us to wrestle with our scriptures like Jacob wrestled with God (Gen. 32:22–32).

What sticks with me from 1 Corinthians 7, however, is Paul's encouragement to carry on without making any drastic, life-changing decisions, at least for the time being. He writes that those who

are married should stay married, even if it is to someone of a different faith. Those who are not married and are able to remain single should do so.

I am surprised by Paul's words especially since they come from someone whose entire career changed after meeting Jesus. I wonder, though, if the difference lies in the relationships and communities Paul is writing to. Paul knows that these church plants in Corinth and across Asia Minor are communities where people will stay. Most of them will not become itinerant missionaries like himself, but will live out their lives of faith in the communities where he first met them. The same holds true for readers of Paul's letter today.

Paul knows that following Jesus changes our lives and demands a radical discipleship from each person. Discipleship does not require that we leave behind the relationships we have already cultivated, but rather that we live more faithfully into them.

Who we were before meeting Jesus matters because the people we knew and loved still matter. We need not abandon the past but instead work to transform the present.

Similarly, I think in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul encourages women not to change how they present themselves when (not if!) they pray or prophesy in the church. The assumption, of course, is that women *will* be doing this in the congregation. In

this passage we see that women were in leadership, even in Paul's day.

Understanding the cultural norms of Paul's day and what would have been considered unusual, transgressive or even unacceptable can help us understand Paul's message in a fuller way. While I was in seminary, my New Testament professor Dr. Jae Won Lee explained that women in Paul's society would have had their heads covered in daily life. So rather than uncovering their heads to speak and lead in the church—which would make them more like the men in their society—they are given permission to speak and lead the church as they are.

In other words, Paul said the women in Corinth did not have to dress or appear like men in order to pray or prophesy in the church. Perhaps Paul was advocating for women not to have to shed their identities in order to lead the church.

I have served three church communities since being ordained, and all of them expected their pastors to robe up for worship on most Sundays. For the first half of my ministry, I wore a very non-descript, boxy, academic robe. A few years ago, however, I purchased a black robe that is more fitted and cinched with beautiful details trimming the sleeves and hem. I now look decidedly more feminine when I preach and lead worship wearing it. Perhaps that is a modern-day version of covering my head when leading the church. More of my identity as a woman is on display through this robe. And while it is a small thing, it is also a significant thing.

Could Paul be affirming our identities and encouraging us not to leave them behind when we become followers of Christ? Some faith leaders and communities teach that we are only faithful to God if we completely change who we are. I suppose that is possible for some. But what if for others, we are the most faithful when we allow

ourselves to become who God always intended and created us to be?

We do not need cookie-cutter Christians who all look the same and act the same. We need faithful followers of Jesus who are secure in their belovedness in God and able to share that love with others. We need not hide who we are to serve God, for God already knows who we are.

Questions for Reflection

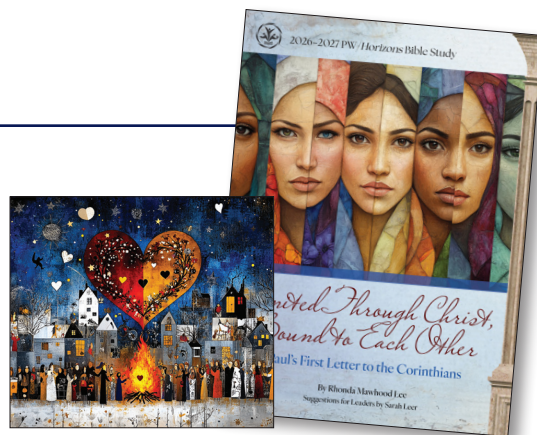
1. What changes have you made in your life as a result of your faith? What has remained constant and unchanging?
2. Did you know women led prayers and prophesied in the church during Paul's time? How have women been in leadership in your faith communities? Which women have influenced your own faith journey?
3. What parts of your identity are affirmed by the church? Are there parts of your identity that are not or have not been affirmed by the church?

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Knowledge and Love

BY REV. JOANN HAEJONG LEE

For use with Lesson Five of the 2026–2027 PW/ Horizons Bible study, *United Through Christ, Bound to Each Other: Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, by Rhonda Mawhood Lee



In her Suggestions for Leaders for this lesson, Sarah Leer reminds us that “1 Corinthians is about people in a multicultural society who were finding boundaries to live in healthy community with one another” (60). The city of Corinth was a port city with people from many different countries and cultures. The church also included people from every stratosphere of wealth and status. Some were well-educated and others were not schooled in any way. As such, being united without being uniform required thoughtful, ongoing work.

Paul's assertion that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” is challenging. Most Presbyterians revere education and trust in it. While knowledge is indeed helpful and important, unless we pair it with love, forbearance and compassion, it may be a detriment or source of division. Knowledge, education or our credentials can make us unrelenting, stubborn and arrogant.

A common question in couples therapy is “Would you rather be right, or would you rather be in relationship?” It is, of course, possible to be both right and in relationship, but sometimes love asks us to set aside what we know to be right for the sake of the relationship.

In 2018, our congregation spent time discerning whether to become a sanctuary church, whether we felt called to make “a sacred, public commitment . . . to stand in solidarity with marginalized

groups—specifically immigrants facing deportation and those affected by mass incarceration.”¹

Many people had unfounded fears or based their opinions on common misconceptions or miscommunications. Some opposed immigration altogether. With an issue as personal as immigration and human movement, strong emotions also came into play. But most were concerned that the church would be breaking laws and opposing law enforcement.

If those advocating for sanctuary had dismissed these concerns and rammed this proposal through, the community would have been harmed by those puffed up with the perception that they were right. Instead, we held listening sessions and learning sessions. We had outside groups tell us what it meant to be a sanctuary church and what it could mean for us at the time.

Ultimately, we tried to draw on love—love of God and love of neighbor, love of the stranger and immigrant, and love for one another—to help move us forward. Eventually our session voted to become a sanctuary church. While education assisted this process, love undergirded it and ultimately made it possible.

Paul's insistence that we put aside what is right for the sake of relationship, however, does not apply to basic human rights or basic human dignity. There is nothing loving about choosing what is easy over what is right when it hurts, harms

or oppresses others. Or as writer Robert Jones, Jr. asserts, “We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.”²

Paul asks the Corinthians to concede on matters of food when there is already an abundance of food, not on matters of whether those who are poor or marginalized may have a seat at the table. Again and again, he advocates for those who have less privilege, less means, and less power, asking those in the community with more to sacrifice and give more.

Christianity is for all people. That said, it urges believers to care particularly for people who are poor, vulnerable and marginalized by society. Jesus’ ministry and the letters of Paul embody these priorities. Because we all live in an interconnected web, when others are liberated and free, all are made free.

Paul leads by example. He can ask the church in Corinth to behave in this way because he acts in this way. He willing sacrifices what could make his life easier or more comfortable, so that new believers are not shaken by his teachings.

This way of thinking is foreign to most of us in the United States. We may understand to varying levels that our actions affect those around us. Changing our actions for the sake of others may feel uncomfortable, extreme or unnecessary. How often do we take the opinions, concerns and beliefs of others into a deep consideration, even sacrificing our own wants and desires?

More communal cultures, like Korea where my parents were born, emphasize collective well-being. What you do and how you act affects others, so of course you would adjust your behavior for the sake of others. As one part of the whole, doing whatever you want without concern

for the greater community is disrespectful and inconsiderate.

Self-determination is a prominent value for one culture while communal care is an inherent value for the other. As a second-generation Korean American who has tried to navigate both cultures, I see both these values as necessary and can affirm why different cultures would uphold one or the other.

Consider these values theologically. Self-determination is knowing that you are created in the image of God. Communal care is knowing that everyone else, too, is created in the image of God. We must indeed heed the words of Jesus to “love your neighbor as you love yourself” as we seek to build and grow in community.

Questions for Reflection

1. What do you think changes hearts and minds: love, facts or both? Why do you think that is?
2. Have you ever had to set aside being right for the sake of preserving a relationship? What was that like?
3. What value is more important in your cultural heritage(s) and/or to you personally: self-determination or communal care? How so?

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Notes

1. “Sanctuary Resources,” The Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity (IM4HI), February 3, 2025; im4humanintegrity.org/2025/02/sanctuary-resources.
2. Robert Jones, Jr. comment on Marlon Weems, *The Journeyman* (Substack), November 11, 2025; substack.com/@robertjonesjr/note/c-176100966?r=rdy32&utm_source=notes-share-action&utm_medium=web.